

Admiral Benedetti's Briefing

By Whatimleavingbehind

The great Spruce stood in respectful silence, grappling with the playful wind whose howling in the chill air raised the hair on Rachel and Silas's bodies as they wrestled beneath it on the bed of bending needles.

Rain took slow, steady turns diving onto their backs and legs, stealing as much sap from the branches as it could and mixing it into scented oil for them below as it fell.

The wind could not hide them.

The wet, gentle clapping the forest heard.

Two dogs in a bed of needles.

In the biting cold.

The first snow of winter was soon to come.

Bare trees around the spruce still kept shade.

Great Ravens were thick through the birch, spruce, pine, and larch.

Summer's green replaced with winter's black.

Cold and wind had no meaning to them.

The sun bled into the forest.

Rachel and Silas still looked not yet sixty.

Those three pills had done their work.

Something they had stopped thinking of.

But Slava did.

Slowly.

In some light they looked almost forty. In any light, never past sixty.

Slava, now in her thirties and thinking more of her own aging, had noticed.

Slava had never seen anyone other than the people she had grown up around before.

Not people who aged like Rachel and Silas.

She had walked past the photo of Silas's grandmother a few times.

A woman who looked far younger than she should have at her age.

Her mind had always filled in the blanks with something like that.

In her mind, that was simply how people from far away looked.

Kind of like how people farther east carried age differently. Slava had known people from there growing up and knew the years did not sit on everyone the same. Rachel had told her bits of it over the years, never like a story, just pieces. Her great-grandmother was Yakutian.

She had brought the Yakutian horses all the way to Krasnoyarsk Krai on her own. She had bought the Dragon Book during her journey and started the

long line of horse breeding Rachel belonged to.

She had married a Jewish exile.

Their child married a Russian, and their child married a Russian, who gave birth to Rachel.

Slava had dismissed it as luck.

It had been sinking in the last few times she saw Rachel.

No longer did she see the old explanations in Rachel's face.

She saw Rachel for what she was.

Too young.

She walked through the cold, the wind, whispering pines, the smell of rotting logs, sap, and horse manure.

Knocked on their door.

She heard hooves and paid no mind until they were close, then right behind her.

She turned to see Buran.

He stared at her for a moment, then trotted away.

They weren't home.

She walked back, her footsteps louder than before, heavier.

Whatever they took, she wanted some too.

She had known them since she was sixteen. Long enough to feel like blood. If she asked, they would not deny her. She could always pay them back in Rubies, she thought.

A drug, maybe.

She didn't want to look old.

She would come back.

She knew she would.

Buran ran around the mansion, back to the front.

He watched Slava disappear into the writhing trees.

"Buran," he thought.

After one of their special walks.

A walk in the rain.

Silas and Rachel returned to the dark, to their jade room, to their bed of wool blankets and furs.

They both smelled faintly of sap.

They had been gone since early morning, walking the property in long raincoats.

Returning with little light left behind them.

They had sat in candlelight eating hot ham from the plate they had brought in.

Rachel had slumped back into one of the blanket piles, finding sleep early.

He blew out the candle, then grabbed one of the furs and draped it over them both.

Rachel shifted towards his warmth, holding onto him.

Soon after, Rachel's arm squeezed tighter around Silas for a moment, deep in sleep.

He smiled warmly in the dark, gently holding her forearm in his hand before he too found sleep.

In the morning he woke to Rachel gone.

He found her with Slava, whose eyes were full of yearning, both drinking coffee.

"Slava wants to do a plasma exchange, she wants to age like us, she doesn't care if the needles hurt," Rachel prompted.

"Oh?

Sure, why not.

I'll set you up after coffee, ok?"

Silas said warmly.

"Really?!"

Slava exclaimed.

"Of course," Silas said, pouring his coffee.

"You have to be very still for hours though, and after you have to lay down and rest here.

You can take a horse back after that.

Ok?" he finished.

"Ya!"

Slava said, beaming at them both.

Rachel and Silas met each other's eyes briefly.

They all drank their coffee.

Silas went over more details, preparing her, soothing her mind.

Slava had never seen much technology.

She was very brave.

But she looked terrified all the same.

After the needles went in and a few minutes passed, Rachel leaned in low

and told her this is it.

Just sit still for awhile.

Nothing more.

Then the needles come out.

That's it.

Then she relaxed.

They sat with her the whole time, talking to her when they sensed she was getting uncomfortable with the machine.

After Slava had rested and left, Silas smirked at Rachel, then pulled her towards him and kissed her before making a late breakfast.

"I had the same dream again," Rachel said, smiling a little.

They had not spoken of the Blue Sapphire or of the dream.

Instinct told them he had killed a Blue, and neither wanted to look too hard at what that meant.

But both were quietly grateful to know.

Silas raised his eyebrows.

"Ya.

Only at the end the Raven had a bubble come out of its mouth," she said,

voice shy.

"Drunk Raven huh?" Silas remarked with dancing eyes.

Rachel stared for a moment, her mouth open.

"Ya," she said.

Silas grinned.

Rachel rose and grappled him to the ground, playful but firm.

Masanori's special order had been shipped to a remote warehouse, waiting there for pickup.

Masanori exited the craft, letting himself down near it.

Then he saw the pink dash of spray paint on one of the sides.

The mark.

He raised the small crowbar in his hand and pried the top off, wood softly wailing as the nails drew out.

He lifted out the five clear bags, each a little bigger than a garbage bag.

Gripping the tops near the ties, three in one hand and two in the other, he brought himself back into the craft.

Back out, he placed the bags on a nearby utility cart that had been waiting.

With one bag slung over his back like a suit jacket, Masanori made his way

to the very end of the last corridor, knocking exactly twice.

Meera soon cracked the door, one eye visible.

She looked at the bags, then up at him, the eye widening in excitement.

The door cracked a little more, a sliver of her body visible from head to toe.

Masanori suddenly said, "Meera, do you need more clothes?"

She disappeared from view.

The door stayed cracked, and not long after Meera burst through the door wearing a solid pastel orange Kaftan.

Then hugged Masanori for a full minute.

Tight.

She dragged all of the bags near where her city of blocks began.

Looking back at Masanori in the doorway, smiling, she said, "Masanori".

He walked in and untied each big knot on the top of each bag.

Meera stared at the bags in amazement for a long time.

Each of the five bags was completely full of small transparent blocks.

Red, Yellow, Blue, Black, and Orange.

He sat down across from Meera, for what would become many hours, and started building a Hydrothermal vent field, while she made a large complex

with several pools and houses.

He looked over to the Medal lying between the two tea cups.

His eyes misted.

It had found its way to him shortly after he had given the briefing.

The information regarding what Meera had done had been disseminated.

Rhames, along with a couple in his circle, had been briefed.

It was the Medal of Freedom.

Masanori took out another which he had made on his last trip to Bangkok.

Made of 24 karat gold.

The pink ribbon it hung from was made of pure silk.

It read "Meera, World's Best Block Builder," and it was ornate.

He presented it to Meera, who was working on the fountain in the middle of the big pool.

Meera exploded into tears.

She put it on proudly, then shouted with tears streaming down her face,

"World's Best".

Winter drew breath and stood.

Rachel, drawn to the cold, had kept busy tending horses.

Silas liked to sprue and air vent wax models this time of year more than anything.

Several waxes and their scents rose from tool to flame, filling the air of his workshop.

Today he poured only two molds.

Three of each.

The "Wind" and "Rachel" faces.

Wind, a focused hunter.

Rachel, the same mold around his neck he never took off.

Her face, hair gently blowing in the wind.

After he finished each one, he would place it on the shelves.

By next spring there would be many dozens patiently waiting.

Some were entirely new pieces, some, like today, he had been re-casting for decades.

They were part of him.

Each one another left behind.

He was attaching the main sprue to the base with the putty-like wax when

Rachel came in.

She didn't walk over behind him and watch.

She didn't dance.

She didn't speak.

Silas stopped working, eyes fixed on the wax model, but listening closely.

She moved slow.

He knew sleep had been hiding from her lately.

This happened to them both in spells.

He knew.

He stood and went into their room.

Lit a candle, the flame cradling her face.

Rachel was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring ahead, fully clothed, her boots still on.

Snow slowly melting onto the jade floor.

Silas untied her boots, took off her sable fur hat and jacket.

Her scarf and gloves were already on the floor.

He then lifted her shirt up and over her head and slid her pants off.

Their bed had more than enough room for them both.

It had loose piles of blankets all across it's surface.

Each one enough for them both.

They collected blankets.

They had asked Kageyama every decade or so to buy one or two they had in mind.

Kageyama was more than happy to do so.

They had access to all the money in the world, and aside from horse food, metal for casting, or investment powder, it was blankets.

It had always made Kageyama smile.

Once it was a King sized Korean Mink blanket with a big Red Dragon on it that cost about a hundred with shipping.

They ended up using this for their pillow, with a thick cotton blanket thrown loosely on top of it.

It had made them sweat.

But they loved it.

Their bed was their burrow.

With a few movements they could either lie flat in the summer with none or in winter be buried in them.

Only having to reach over and pull a fur to cover them like a lid.

Silas put an arm under her knees and one behind her back, lifting her into the perfect spot, and pulled a fur over her.

Before he left and blew out the candle, he took his shirt off, mopping up the water from her boots and what had fallen off her coat.

Then he went back and finished sprueing.

Rachel woke him in the middle of the night, squeezing his wrist hard.

At first he thought she was having a nightmare, but after lighting a candle with his free hand he quickly saw she was wide awake.

Her eyes open looking right at him.

Staring.

He had never once seen her like this and grew concerned quickly.

"Rachel, are you ok?" he asked.

She kept squeezing him hard.

He kissed her face over and over, then her lips.

"It's ok," he said warmly.

Rachel broke out of it.

"It felt so real," she mumbled.

Minutes passed.

Then she spoke again.

"We were being boiled alive by the Blues.

They were going to eat us or something."

Silas reassured her, "That's terrifying Rachel.

It was a nightmare.

They drop a Bear out of the Sky when they are trying to communicate.

They have poor social skills, Rachel."

She laughed.

"They look at our memories.

They don't boil us.

They're like Jellyfish, remember what Kageyama said, they brought us back to life.

Why would they wanna eat us if they brought us back?" he finished while rubbing her back and kissing her shoulder.

"Ya.

Archivists." Rachel said while sliding down her thong, tossing it off the bed.

She got on top of Silas and made love, slowly, lying on him gently with her elbows on either side of his head.

Rachel was an expert at cuddling.

Rhames opened the door to his home to find Admiral Benedetti standing there.

She gave a brief, firm handshake.

Then raised a folder with two printed photographs paperclipped to either side.

Rhames looked at them, then at the dates which had been handwritten at the tops of each paper.

November 14 and December 9th.

It took Rhames only a few moments to understand.

He closed the folder and gave it back to the Admiral.

Rhames quickly walked back inside, opened the drawer, and turned on his other phone.

No message this time.

He started calling Masanori on his way out the door and into the car with Admiral Benedetti.

"Check on them now.

Look for any signs of illness.

Bring Go-Pills.

Or whatever you have to keep them awake for a couple days.

Tell them there's been a Virus spreading.

You just wanna check on them.

Find any reason to give them the pills.

I will be in your office with Admiral Benedetti by the time you get back.

Go," Rhames said.

Masanori heard Rachel's Cello playing low and slow as he approached.

He knocked on the door.

No one answered.

He knocked louder.

Silas opened the door.

He had dark circles under his eyes.

His face gaunt.

He spoke softly as if his mouth was dry and he hadn't slept for a couple days.

"Masanori," he exclaimed.

His voice a shadow of what it once was, as if the volume had been turned down.

They bowed.

Rachel's head wasn't fully upright as she spoke, her eyes looking at him more out of the corners of her eyes than anything.

"Masanori," she too exclaimed.

"Want some tea?" she said with a broken smile.

Her eyes dark, voice small.

"I would, thank you Rachel," he said with quiet warmth as they both too bowed.

Rachel got up slowly, walking over, and began to make tea.

"There has been a Virus spreading all over this region, we know you don't watch the news.

Its symptoms are muscle weakness, sore throat, and fatigue," he quickly improvised.

"What makes this Virus stand out, of course, is what I think you may already know.

Insomnia.

Symptoms are severe.

We thought we'd check on you.

Glad we did.

Had to have come in on food packaging or something you ordered,"

Masanori finished.

Rachel and Silas broke out in overlapping words of gratitude for Masanori's visit.

"I'm glad I brought them then.

These are what they're giving everybody," he said, walking over, dropping a couple pills in their palms.

Which they took right away with the glasses half full on the table behind them.

Go-pills.

Modafinil.

Same thing pilots take to stay awake.

The other was a high dose of Vitamin B12.

Both from the lab at the facility.

Rachel gave Masanori his tea.

"We thought we had a Virus or something.

I kept having these strange dreams, more and more.

Then Silas started to.

Then we felt like we were going crazy.

We couldn't sleep," Rachel whispered.

"Now we know.

Thanks Masanori," Silas breathed.

Masanori drank his tea for a moment as if in thought.

"No problem.

I'll bring some electrolyte drinks and maybe some more pills tomorrow," he paused, drinking some more of his tea.

"I almost forgot.

Those pills work better if you stay awake the first night.

Looks like you haven't been sleeping, but I heard the first night matters.

Receptors or Blood Brain Barrier, can't remember.

Something.

Eat as much food as you can.

I have a meeting now.

Tomorrow," he said firmly.

He finished his tea.

Then he walked to the door saying "Thank you for the tea Rachel.

Goodbye Silas."

And left.

Rhames and Admiral Benedetti sat across from Masanori.

His eyes were blazing like torches at Benedetti who had just slid the same folder she had shown Rhames earlier.

Rhames said sharply "Do you need a moment Masanori?"

A long pause.

"We just got the intel hours ago.

They were never right, Masanori.

A skull fracture left him with processing issues.

She lived curled up in a wooden box behind the house half the time to escape her parents.

In the Arctic.

She carried a sword so no one dared touch her.

Almost the whole village called her Weasel Ears, Kageyama said.

What was new in them was always going to hide inside what was already broken."

Masanori stood, poured three glasses, they all drank, then drank again.

Masanori bowed, then said, "Admiral Benedetti," and sat back down.

They knew.

He needed a few more minutes.

They waited.

Masanori knew their behavior was within normal range for them.

Kageyama had told him enough.

Rhames didn't need to.

Duty had sharpened his anger, but he knew Rhames was right.

Then Admiral Benedetti spoke as if nothing had happened.

"We can't be down there all the time, Masanori.

It's adaptive secretion, an antimicrobial barrier.

The nearest thing to it on earth is diet, what a body takes in until it begins to answer back.

They're tuning to the planet.

The vents are part of it.

The minerals.

The dissolved metals.

The whole field there is feeding the process.

The metal in the Blues' heads heats and expands.

Expansion raises vibration.

Vibration raises the tension in the field and lets them draw Rachel and Silas to them more easily in sleep.

It's clear now this is not something they are allowed to do.

The blue on them may be the work of tens of thousands of years.

In just weeks they have almost doubled it.

There has never been anything like Rachel and Silas here before.

That must be it.

Likely it has something to do with them having been brought back.

Some part of them may have come back coded differently.

Too close.

Too legible to them.

As if the door never shut all the way.

If they were free to do it, Rachel and Silas would have been gone long ago.

Archivists, like Kageyama spoke of.

Only now it's looking more like rare book thieves living in the basement of

the library they just robbed.

Rachel and Silas, given their true age, their abilities, and the fact that both had been brought back, once by them, once by Nikolia, would carry the strongest tension in that field of anyone on Earth.

The clearest targets.

The nearest thing to their own pattern they could find.

That's why they can be seen down there by the vents.

As if copied bodies and spirits were being dissected.

Whatever is being done there, whatever you call it, part of them is being borrowed at night, taken while they sleep.

It must leave them feeling as if the life has been drawn out of them little by little."

Masanori opened back up the folder sitting in front of him.

He looked at the photos for a long time.

The Blues on December 9th had almost twice as much transparent Blue wash over their skin as on November 14th.

"Meera is the only one who can do this now," Rhames said quietly.

He had been the one to discover Meera, if you could call it that.

She had appeared in his craft, he had almost crashed.

He heard a voice say playfully, "I'm Meera."

He turned to see her sitting cross-legged on the floor of the craft, smiling as she quickly took a sip from her water device.

Rhames wasn't even over India.

He had asked her to show him where she lived, which to his surprise, she did.

Steering the craft on her own.

She showed him.

She was homeless.

She had no family.

He had gathered that another homeless woman had educated her, in a way, before dying.

They had sat in the craft for hours.

She said she wanted to live in his home.

The craft.

That had eventually led to her living at the facility.

Kageyama had taken what had come through Rachel and Silas and turned it

outward until the whole world felt it.

The free quinoa in the thick brown bags.

The water devices in every hand.

Hunger and thirst gone from the earth not by governments, not by prayers,

but by one man refusing to keep for himself what had first come through

them, the two he had once helped pull back into life.

For decades the living had eaten because of it.

Drunk because of it.

Children had stayed standing because of it.

But compared to the countless lives Kageyama had saved from hunger and

thirst year after year, the scale of it was almost too large to hold in the mind.

That was why they were here.

That was why this place existed.

That was why men like them gave their lives and did not complain.

All Kageyama had ever wanted back for what he had done for the world was

simple.

Rachel and Silas safe.

Rachel and Silas happy.

And now it was time to pay that debt.

"We have to try now, Masanori.

Today," Rhames said.

"I know," Masanori replied.

They all rose and walked to Meera's door, knocking exactly twice.

"Hey Rhames," Meera said, hugging him.

She went inside and sat down, and they followed.

"We need you again, Meera.

The world does," Masanori said.

"Ok," Meera said plainly.

"Do you see this," he said, pointing to the hydrothermal vent field he had made.

"Yes," Meera said without looking.

"There are sea creatures that are lost.

They are living above these vents deep in the ocean.

They are eating the wrong food.

They are killing all the good animals," Masanori explained.

"They're hurting the good animals?" Meera asked.

Relief moved through the room so quietly it was almost reverence.

"Remember that show you like, Meera? The salamanders. They go onto land too. When the food is gone, creatures don't stay where they are. If they finish the good animals, they will come up next for us," Rhames said.

"Meera, I will take you to the location.

After that, you alone will guide the craft.

We will be in your hands," Rhames said.

"I get to fly the craft back," Meera exclaimed.

Her face lit up.

"Of course.

Once you arrive, you will save the good animals by taking the metal out of the center of their heads," Masanori explained.

Meera laughed.

"Like a cherry," Meera said still laughing.

"Yes," Masanori said with quiet warmth.

"Like a cherry."

Masanori continued "yes the second you arrive take all of the metal cherry pits out of their heads, then bring the metal cherry pits and their bodies back

here and drop them in the clear box you will see before leaving," Masanori finished.

"That's it?" Meera said.

She smiled.

"If you do that, Meera, tell us what you want and it is yours," Masanori said.

"A whole cheesecake," Meera said almost before he was done speaking.

They all walked to the craft on the end her favorite.

Next to it stood a large containment chamber, no door, just a sealed block.

Airtight.

A foot thick.

Rhames shook Admiral Benedetti's hand, bowed to Masanori.

Knowing he could die, knowing if they succeeded there was no telling what more Blues would come and do.

But they had given their word, and they would not fail Kageyama now.

They knew enough.

The Blues were adapting to Earth.

The secretion had made that undeniable.

Whatever they were preparing themselves to become here, it was not good.

Their odds were fifty-fifty.

Earth would be taken in some form either way.

They were going down fighting.

That was all.

Rhames and Meera entered the craft, it vanished before them.

In less than a second after Masanori and Admiral Benedetti heard a series of loud clacks and wet slops of the Blues being dropped in the containment chamber.

"You saved us, Meera," Masanori said quickly.

She high fived all three of them, then started running back to her room giggling then she shouted "Cherry" halfway back.

"Cherry cheesecake coming up," Admiral Benedetti said.

Before all three of them fought tears and lost. For a few seconds none of them moved.

Meera's joy still hung in the room, bright and tender against the cold shape of the sealed box waiting nearby, until at last they stepped toward it.

Seeing them close, the Blues looked remarkable.

The translucent Robin's egg blue over their mottled skin was hypnotic, like

the kind of pattern in nature that teaches the eye to look in the wrong place
a moment before dying.

Hide like a tree frog.

Photographs they had all seen, even having seen them not too far away in
the craft by the vents, did not help the surprise.

Their faces were far more shaped than they were prepared for.

It was the lips they all noticed, each of them almost speaking the thought
aloud.

The lips were not small.

It was the mottling that did it, running over their faces and over their
mouths too, breaking the shape apart until, from more than a few feet away,
the mouth seemed to vanish into a narrow line.

That was what the eye had been getting wrong.

What made it read as a slit.

No one could explain why they even had them, and none of them wanted to
think on that now.

They would leave that to the scientists to brief them on later.

Then their eyes found the damage.

The cavities in the centers of their heads were impossible not to look at, each one opened around the place where a plum-shaped metal sphere had been torn free.

There was no blood.

Only a thick clear syrup, glossy and slow, gathering where blood should have been.

What could still be seen of the brain looked denser in its turns than ours, more crowded, though the damage made certainty difficult. At the very bottom of each cavity was a smooth half-sphere, an indentation where the metal had been resting.

Their eyes dropped to the spheres themselves.

There looked to be nine or ten.

Maybe the Blues had been lying on some.

Maybe not.

They looked at one another, as if to reassure themselves it was all real.

Masanori said firmly, "It has been an honor."

Then they saw why.

The metal spheres rose and hung there for a few breaths.

Rhames and Admiral Benedetti, almost at the same time, said, "An honor."

They drifted toward them.

All three made small involuntary sounds.

Then the spheres floated past them.

They all turned at once.

A very short Grey hovered there behind them, solid grey like a dolphin, perhaps three and a half feet tall, hanging just off the ground at nearly eye level, simply staring.

No one said it first.

They all knew.

The blue had not only been for Earth.

It had been concealment too.

Whatever the Blues had been coating themselves in to tune their bodies to this planet had also kept them dimmed from something older.

Something looking.

Now that they were dead, and split open, whatever had hidden them was gone.

At once all of the spheres began to glow, brighter and brighter, until they

were red hot.

Then they began collapsing inward from all sides at once, as if under some unknown pressure.

The pressure had to be immense.

The heat was.

They shrank from plums to peas.

When they struck the ground, the hard clack made all three of them nearly jump.

Same weight by the sound of it.

Just smaller.

Then, so slowly it almost felt like a mirage, the Grey drew closer, almost gently.

It raised its arms.

Its long fingers stretched toward the spaces between them, as though touching some invisible field of mind.

At first it felt like the memory of bubbles rising.

Not boiling.

Small pops.

Like bubbles blown as a child, bursting one by one.

Slowly a pleasant feeling took hold.

As the rhythm of it grew clearer, so did the meaning.

Each little pop came with a flash of memory.

Kageyama's face.

Rachel.

Silas.

The craft.

The Blues.

The mansion.

Uniformed men.

Rooms.

Bits and pieces.

Images too fast to hold.

Soon they could no longer follow them.

It felt as though they were some carbonated thing being slowly enjoyed,

while also feeling what it was like for the Grey to drink.

Not hunger exactly.

Not cruelty.

Recognition.

Sorting.

A calm taking in.

Then it slowed.

Then it was gone.

The Grey lowered its arms.

Then at once it spoke to them, not through sound exactly, but through the
age of its mind.

"Restricted planet.

Blue thief.

Blue criminal.

Kill Blue.

Planet ambassador.

One only.

Blue hide.

Cant see.

Must melt.

Love restricted.

Planet love.

Dog love.

Human love.

Elephant love.

Bird love.

Beetle love.

Dont keep.

Blue disease.

Blue read wrong.

Blue take wrong.

Blue hide in memory.

Blue hide in love.

Not keeper.

Not allowed.

Planet closed.

Blue break law.

Must open.

Must melt.

One ambassador.

No Blue."

Then at once the containment box disappeared along with the Grey.

But the spheres stayed.

The strange peace it had laid over them began to lift once the Grey was gone.

None of them could later remember how long they stood there.

Relief that they were alive.

Relief that they had succeeded.

And beneath both, the revelation settling coldly into place.

The secretion had not only been adaptation.

It had been cover.

A way to stay and feed and go unseen.

Then, all at once, Rhames's laughter bellowed out of him, rich and loud, and went on a long time before he managed to say, "I think we all need therapy, but they're not cleared for it."